

IV. Interagency Policy Forum for Youth At-Risk

The School-to-Career system is designed to provide a full range of options for all students to participate in relevant learning experiences which will lead to high-performance, high-wage jobs. However, coordinating services and activities across the disparate support systems which serve youth – especially at-risk and out-of-school youth – presents a complex challenge to meeting this goal. As a step towards addressing the need to coordinate and improve service delivery for youth at-risk, Colorado conducted a collaborative Interagency Policy Forum for Youth At-Risk.

This section describes the process and purpose of the Policy Forum and presents the action plans which resulted from this work. The workbook which was used for Colorado's Forum is also included.



Chapter 4

Conducting an Interagency Policy Forum for Youth At-Risk

Any life transition is difficult, whether it is transition from infancy to school, school to school, school to work, or job to job. Generally, many important life transitions occur between the ages of 15 and 25. Those youth who have social, physical, or other conditions which put them at-risk during this period face especially difficult transitions – additionally, serving these youth presents a complex challenge to the array of minimally coordinated support systems.

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In Colorado, we believe that enlightened youth policy must stress both the richness of the support network available to serve youth and the quality of the individual initiatives. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act mandates the inclusion of all students and coordinates activities among many of the programs comprising this youth support network. However, despite this coordinated delivery system provided by School-to-Career, those identified youth are too often disenfranchised from the system and receive minimal-to-no support. Therefore, Colorado held a Policy Forum to address such issues around serving at-risk youth.

This section describes the purpose, process, and outcomes of the Interagency Policy Forum for Youth-at-Risk. Action plans developed via the Policy Forum are also presented. Incidentally, Resource Mapping was one of the recommendations that emerged from the Policy Forum; this work guided initial design of the statewide and local Resource Mapping projects. For states or localities replicating Resource Mapping, a Policy Forum can be focused on serving at-risk youth – however, this model can also be used to focus on any other targeted group or goal of School-to-Career. As a companion to Resource Mapping, a Policy Forum can be conducted at any point in the process.

I. The Landscape

The Colorado School-to-Career Partnership and local School-to-Career systems strive to provide a full range of options to all students, including those who plan to enter either post-secondary education or the workforce both during and after high school, gifted, at-risk, disabled, minority, disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and out-of-school youth. A full range of opportunities must be available for this diverse mix of youth to participate in experiences leading to high-performance, high-paying jobs, including those non-traditional to their gender.



Early in 1997, the Colorado School-to-Career Partnership and the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment convened a task force to develop a State Level Management Plan to address issues regarding serving out-of-school youth and those at-risk of dropping out. This work resulted in a management plan focused on the inclusion of at-risk and out-of-school youth in statewide School-to-Career systems. About the same time, groups began to discuss the need to align policy and resources to serve at-risk youth. In June of 1997, a Collaborative Interagency Policy Forum for Youth-At-Risk was convened to address this issue.

These two events led to the development of a concrete, collaborative action plan for changing systems and re-aligning human and fiscal resources to support at-risk and out-of-school youth in their pursuits of educational, career, and life goals.

II. *Choosing a destination*

The purpose of the Policy Forum was to bring together agency directors and key decision-makers to develop action plans for creating a collaborative, seamless service delivery system for at-risk youth. Efforts were primarily designed to support and sustain School-to-Career principles, transition, and interagency collaborative initiatives in Colorado. The Forum was convened in June of 1997 by Colorado's Lieutenant Governor; it was co-sponsored by the Colorado School-to-Career Partnership, the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, the National School-to-Work Office, and the National Transition Alliance.

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In essence, the Policy Forum was broadly structured to address two major questions regarding the state's ability to develop and maintain systems to help youth transition from school to work:

Question 1: How are at-risk and out-of-school youth included in strategies to meet the School-to-Career system's goal of providing education and work experiences for ALL youth?

Question 2: How will School-to-Career principles be sustained once the federal grant has sunset?

Within the framework of addressing these important questions, the Policy Forum was designed to pursue the following broad goals:

- ◆ Build on successful strategies and best practices that comprehensively support out-of-school and at-risk youth.
- ◆ Develop coordinated, collaborative methods – across relevant agencies and organizations – to devise policy for serving out-of-school and at-risk youth.
- ◆ Utilize the School-to-Career system to develop local implementation strategies to support out-of-school youth and those at risk of dropping out of school.



III. Setting the odometer

The following section outlines the process used in Colorado to conduct the Interagency Policy Forum for Youth-At-Risk. This model can be adapted and used by other states or local communities to develop policy strategies to support youth at-risk move successfully into adult life and employment.

Participants

In Colorado, Forum participants spanned an array of state and community agencies that serve youth at-risk. Participants were all decision-makers with authority to commit funds, establish policy, and change rules and regulations. To encourage the highest level of involvement, participants were invited by the Lieutenant Governor. State Legislators were invited to attend the last hour of the Forum to participate in determining outcomes.

Forum participants represented the following state agencies:

- ◆ Community Colleges and Occupational Education
- ◆ Department of Education
- ◆ Department of Health
- ◆ Department of Human Services
- ◆ Department of Labor and Employment
- ◆ Division of Criminal Justice
- ◆ Division of Developmental Disabilities
- ◆ Division of Mental Health
- ◆ Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
- ◆ Division of Youth Services

Other organizations/individuals represented included:

- ◆ Colorado Foundation for Families and Children
- ◆ Colorado School-to-Career Partnership
- ◆ Legislators
- ◆ Lieutenant Governor
- ◆ National Transition Alliance
- ◆ Parents Groups
- ◆ University Deans/Directors responsible for teacher and human services training

Process

A Policy Forum can be held in a two-day workshop or spread over several months – in Colorado, participants met for three half-day planning sessions. Participant follow-up entails additional hours.



The format included a combination of large and small group activities. A Participant Workbook (see the workbook following page 142) guided the overall process. A final report synthesized all the information and action plans that were generated through the Forum. (An overview of this final report is presented in section IV of this chapter.) An outside facilitator was hired to guide the Policy Forum.

Essentially, the process for the Policy Forum comprised three major steps:

Step 1: Identify successful strategies for serving at-risk and out-of-school youth.

Step 2: Brainstorm barriers, issues, and concerns that hinder local communities' efforts to develop strategies that engage or re-engage at-risk and out-of-school youth.

Step 3: Prioritize issues identified to develop goals and objectives and form action plans.

IV. Reviewing the route

As School-to-Career is implemented and connecting activities are developed, human and fiscal resources must be properly aligned to support these systems over time. Using a systems change perspective, the Policy Forum addressed how to align policy, practice, resources, and individuals' roles and responsibilities – within the human services and education systems and related systems – to achieve a new vision for the successful transition of youth-at-risk from school to work and adult life.

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Participants explored trends that influence at-risk and out-of-school youth, considered elements of a seamless system of service delivery, and developed three action plans. These plans essentially summarize the best thinking of the participants in the process and the agencies they represent. What began as a workshop became a framework, providing concrete action plans and goals, as well as a set of objectives and strategies that can be modified as conditions and needs change across the state.

Essentially, this framework and the resulting action plans comprise six characteristics for positive change.

1. Develop agency policy – affirmation, coordination, and collaboration
2. Integrate maintenance for the School-to-Career system into state agencies' operations
3. Broaden the scope of participants
4. Articulate systems values to work toward a common goal
5. Develop and disseminate "Best Practices"
6. Re-align human and fiscal resources

The following challenges and elements of such a seamless system, using these characteristics, were identified by the participants and shaped the action plans.



Challenges and trends that influence youth:

- ◆ Job market skills
- ◆ Family pressures
- ◆ Building a system on assets of youth and different levels of risk and resiliency with a focus on prevention
- ◆ A “get tough” mentality toward youth
- ◆ Limited resources
- ◆ Need to change current practice (as part of pressure on agencies)
- ◆ Peer pressure
- ◆ Less federal support for collaboration (as part of pressure on agencies)

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Elements of a seamless system:

- ◆ An articulated vision across public and private agencies for youth transition
- ◆ Efficient use of resources across the system
- ◆ A uniform, confidential record system
- ◆ Local control driven by common standards
- ◆ Consumer-driven system
- ◆ Buy-in at all levels: state, local, national
- ◆ Attention to individual needs of families and communities
- ◆ Informed decision-making via access to information
- ◆ Issues framed as strengths
- ◆ Periodic review for quality assurance
- ◆ A “Life Planning Process” to aid everyone dealing with transition

Colorado has an infrastructure in place to resolve most of these barriers, issues, and concerns around serving at-risk youth and to create a seamless system. The challenge is to move beyond the initial planning stages to development of a comprehensive implementation plan to improve service delivery. Completing activities, enhancing local networking, and building relationships that include all youth within a seamless, statewide service delivery system will aid in achieving this goal. The following action plans entail the initial steps to meet this challenge.

Developing Action Plans

Action planning areas were determined by the Forum participants. Once delineated, participants self-selected themselves into these groups to develop action plans to address issues. Team leaders were identified to provide ongoing coordination for the emergent action steps. Group participants continued to work on implementing the action plans after the conclusion of the Policy Forum.



Action Plan #1

Goal: To develop a seamless system of service delivery for at-risk youth as they transition to employment and adulthood. Address policy issues, barriers, and opportunities identified in the Policy Forum to develop such a seamless system.

Task Group: Participants included representatives from the Colorado Department of Education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Colorado School-to-Career Partnership, Department of Labor and Employment, and University of Colorado Health Sciences Center.

Team Leaders: Colorado School-to-Career Partnership; Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

Action Steps:

1. Design a mechanism to compile locally identified issues, strengths, and barriers.
2. Develop uniform recommendations and action steps to address policy change and/or develop policy for individual agencies to pursue.
3. Facilitate communication among agencies and organizations.

Action Plan #2

Goal: To design and implement a demonstration project in three local communities that will deliver effective transition services for at-risk youth via collaborative, interagency strategies.

Task Group: Participants included representatives from the Department of Education, Division of Youth Services, Division of Mental Health, Community Colleges and Occupational Education System, and Division of Developmental Disabilities.

Team Leaders: Community Colleges and Occupational Education; Division of Youth Services

Action Steps:

1. Identify representatives from a variety of state agencies to form a committee.
2. Identify three local communities as demonstration sites. Communities must commit to participating in the project and set local goals, outcomes, and timelines to develop products.
3. State committee representatives meet with representatives from the identified local communities and work with the local School-to-Career partnerships.
4. Communities identify policy issues, barriers, best practices, financing, and funding issues.
5. Communities provide the state with information about policy, funding, overall issues, and strategies to deliver transition services to at-risk youth.
6. State committee reviews the local information and makes recommendations.
7. Test new strategies at the local level.
8. Disseminate information and replicate practices statewide.



Action Plan #3

Goal: To conduct an interagency systems analysis to identify effective practices, gaps, and challenges and opportunities regarding funding, policy, and services for youth-at-risk. Use this analysis to develop recommendations to improve collaborative service delivery strategies.

Task Group: Participants included representatives from the Colorado School-to-Career Partnership, National Transition Alliance, Colorado State University – School of Education, Colorado Department of Education, and Division of Criminal Justice.

Team Leaders: Colorado State University – School of Education; Division of Criminal Justice

Action Steps:

1. Collect baseline information regarding programs, policies, interagency collaboration, and funding.
2. Consider funding sources.
3. Look for vendor(s) to conduct/obtain administrative support to identify agencies to be involved in the project.
4. Develop a budget for collecting information and conducting an analysis.
5. Consider systems challenges: a) different policies, statutes, and procedures for change; b) lack of information regarding the roles of various agencies in serving youth-at-risk; and c) conflicting state and federal requirements within and across agencies serving the same population.
6. Consider youth challenges: a) confusion about who provides what services; b) range of services available and gaps/lacks in services; c) time-limited services (i.e., not based on need); d) youth-at-risk are known for their deficits, not their strengths; and e) limited family support.

VII. Summary

*This work
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at-risk youth.*

Completing these activities will leverage and extend the work and leadership of the Policy Forum by providing comprehensive, on-going plans for effectively serving at-risk youth. These plans will include the mapping and realigning of public and private resources, aligning policy and removing barriers to collaboration and resource convergence, and building public demand for an effective, comprehensive School-to-Career system that incorporates the needs of youth-at-risk. The products, processes and messages developed through this process will be disseminated through a range of diverse and effective channels to support local partnerships in Colorado and the efforts of other states and localities.



SAMPLE INVITATION

COLLABORATIVE INTERAGENCY POLICY FORUM FOR YOUTH-AT-RISK

Sponsored by:

- ◆ Colorado School-to-Career Partnership
- ◆ Colorado Foundation for Families and Children
- ◆ National School-to-Work Office
- ◆ National Transition Alliance (STW for Youth with Disabilities)

Purpose: The purpose of this Forum is to bring together agency directors/decision-makers to develop a collaborative seamless system of service delivery for at-risk youth (including out-of-school, disadvantaged, and disabled youth). This effort is designed to support and sustain School-to-Career, Transition, and related interagency and collaborative initiatives in Colorado.

The Forum will focus on four outcomes:

1. Build on successful strategies and practices that support at-risk youth (e.g. Colorado Systems Change Transition Project for Youth with Disabilities).
2. Develop an interagency resource pool to establish a method of coordination across state agencies and organizations.
3. Develop a forum for interagency policy development to support youth-at-risk transition successfully from school-to-work and adult life.
4. Develop local implementation strategies to support youth at-risk through the School-to-Career system of comprehensive planning.

Design: The “Future Search” process will be utilized to assist decision-makers in developing a comprehensive action plan and commitment of resources in a compressed time period. The Forum will be conducted on the afternoon of Thursday, April 24th and all day Friday, April 25th.

Participants: Participants will include approximately 40 decision-makers who are involved with at-risk youth services; representatives will span education, human services, welfare reform, the justice system and other key systems and partnerships across Colorado.